

5 Ways to Promote Student Success in Online Learning

A new report from Strada Education Network offers key takeaways from last fall's Online Student Success Symposium, a two-day workshop focused on challenges, innovative practices and future opportunities in online learning. Hosted by BYU-Pathway Worldwide and sponsored by Strada, the event convened online learning leaders from higher education as well as organizations that provide student support services, for a series of presentations and conversations on data analytics, curriculum, standards and measurement, and mentoring and coaching.

Gleaned from those discussions were five best practices for promoting student success in online learning environments:

1. Understand current and future student populations. "To best serve the online learner population now and in the future, it is critical to gain a thorough understanding of these educational consumers, including their potential risk factors, curricular interests, educational and career goals, and interventions that will support their success," noted the report, adding that this population is likely to change dramatically over time. "By listening to education consumers and understanding the diversity of their experiences and their expectations, online providers can tailor programs and offerings to meet their needs while planning for future offerings."
2. Design online programs and courses to deliver personalized learning. Here the report recommended rethinking traditional course requirements, prerequisites and processes, in order to "adopt a student-first focus." The power of online learning, the report said, is in "using real-time data to identify individual needs and develop curricula that provide individualized instruction, remediation, and tailored support directly to individual students." For instance, "rather than requiring general-education classes during the beginning of postsecondary study, effective curricula front-loads academic wins in the freshman year and engages students in their areas of interest immediately by offering practical experience in the field and an opportunity to earn stackable credentials enroute to degree completion." Online programs must continually adapt and evolve to meet student needs, the report added.
3. Leverage new technologies to optimize the impact of human coaching and mentoring. Technology is not a replacement for human interaction, but tools such as data analytics can help make student advising and interventions more efficient and effective. "Using our student experience data to be at the right time and the right place with the right focus can be a powerful differentiator for online learning," the report said, and "delivering the appropriate balance between online group instruction, individualized virtual coaching and mentoring, and in-person meetings is important to keep students engaged, focused, and moving forward in their studies."
4. Explore multiple models for building community. Symposium participants agreed that community building is key to the success of individual students, but all had approached that task in different ways. "There are lessons to be learned across the approaches and interest in further exploring the key ingredients within the various programs," the report said.
5. Build a data-driven culture of innovation and accountability. "Using hard data that everyone values as relevant can help build a culture that puts student success and lifelong outcomes at the forefront and provides common ground to demonstrate success, share information on what is working, and hold each other accountable for what is not," the report said. In particular, "it is crucial to agree, not only on outcome goals, but also on how these goals will be reached, how success will be measured, and how students and faculty will be held accountable." At the same time, institutions need to embrace innovation: "In a fast-paced online learning environment, [that] means developing a mindset that encourages institutions and individuals to reach and experiment while learning quickly from failures as well as successes and adapting to address evolving challenges."